

**Statement of the Honorable Tom Bliley
Subcommittee on Trade, Telecommunications,
and Consumer Protection**

**Hearing on
Air Bags, Car Seats, and Child Safety**

April 28, 1997

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

I want to thank you for holding this hearing, the first in a series of hearings on the reauthorization of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. I think that we can all agree that a discussion of air bags and child safety is an appropriate place to begin with an agency whose primary mission is ensuring the safety of occupants in motor vehicles.

With 63 confirmed fatalities -- and countless injuries -- attributed to air bag deployments, it is no wonder that the public is concerned with the prospect of driving with these devices in their cars. However, we must keep in mind that air bags have been responsible for saving the lives of many others, as well as reducing injuries in the vast majority of cases.

In examining the data, seat belt use is the single variable that can mean the difference between life and death. More often than not, when a vehicle occupant is properly seated and belted, the air bag serves its life saving function. When the person does not wear their seat belt, or improperly seats a child in the front seat, the results are often catastrophic. If ever there was an argument for buckling up, this is it.

One proposed solution to the air bag problem has been the option to allow “disconnect-on-demand” where a consumer could have his or her dealer disconnect their air bag system. While I have always believed that a consumer should have the right to decide whether or not he or she wants an air bag, I am very concerned about the existing proposals to allow air bag disconnections.

My concerns are twofold. First, I would hope that consumers would make their decision on whether or not to have their air bag disconnected based on the facts rather than the media hype surrounding this issue. Mr. Chairman, I believe this hearing will go a long way to ensuring that the American consumer gets those facts.

Second, I believe that the substantial liability concerns of both the manufacturers and dealers are valid. Congress required that manufacturers install air bags in their vehicles. Now, the Agency is going to give consumers permission to have them disconnected. This places the consumer's primary point of contact — the dealer — in a catch 22: if they don't disconnect someone's air bag, and they're injured, the dealer and manufacturer get sued. If they do disconnect the air bag, and someone gets injured, they get sued. Since Congress placed this obligation on the manufacturers, it is our responsibility to ensure that they do not suffer the ill-effects when we decide that maybe the air bag mandate was not such a good idea after all.

Mr. Chairman, I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today. I think that today's hearing will be informative and educational, both for Members, and the public.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.